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ABSTRACT

The Holocaust is a powerful topic for writing classrooms because it elicits strong emotions from most students at the same time that it is remote enough to keep from overwhelming them (at least at first). At the same time the topic presents a minefield for the unwary or naive writing instructor--it is important, for example, to emphasize the rhetorical aspects of the subject and encourage students to study other examples of ethnic or religious exclusivity, bureaucratic indifference, eugenics, and genocide. Most important, the topic can demonstrate to students how serious, sustained inquiry can reveal facts, attitudes, and opinions that will shape their personal intellectual landscape. Some reasons for using the Holocaust in a writing course are: accessibility (the Holocaust is a story with a beginning, middle, and end); the emotional force of the topic; the emotional distance afforded by the topic; the moral complexity of many of the issues; the historical complexity of the subject; and a dialect about the role of language in a bureaucracy and what constitutes acceptable discussion. The phenomenon of Holocaust denial might also be a worthwhile subject in a writing class. Can tolerance and empathy be fostered through a study of the Holocaust? Probably, but students' thinking should not be expected to change in direct ways. (Contains 8 notes and 19 references.) (NKA)

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# Educating for Empathy and Tolerance: Holocaust Studies and the Teaching of Writing.

by Gordon P. Thomas

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# Educating for Empathy and Tolerance:

## Holocaust Studies and the Teaching of Writing

All of us would like to think that we can influence our students' future attitudes and actions by the general topics that we ask them to explore. The Holocaust, probably the most disturbing sequence of events in modern history, is a powerful topic for writing classrooms because it elicits strong emotions from most students at the same time that it is remote enough to keep from overwhelming them (at least at first); there exists a wide array of accessible teaching materials related to the topic; it provides historical depth and complexity to the study of violence, helping students understand violent societies in general and particular historical circumstances, the tail end of which are still being played out in the Balkans today. At the same time, the topic presents a minefield for the unwary or naïve writing instructor: some students may develop a chilling callousness toward human suffering; others may espouse Holocaust denial or latent antisemitism. I would like to argue that in spite of these problems, the study of the Holocaust can deepen students' historical understanding at the same time that it nurtures their capacity for tolerance and empathy.

At least, that's what I was planning to argue last year when I wrote my abstract. I am now less optimistic about the prospects for nurturing the capacity for tolerance and empathy. And – historian Peter Novick's recent book, *The Holocaust in American Life* (published this past fall) argues that the Holocaust has come to be overemphasized in American culture and education. I

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still think the Holocaust can work well in a writing course, but it is important to emphasize the rhetorical aspects of the subject and encourage students to study other examples of ethnic or religious exclusivity, bureaucratic indifference, eugenics, and genocide. Most important, the topic can demonstrate to students how serious, sustained inquiry can reveal facts, attitudes, and opinions that will shape their personal intellectual landscape.

When I first started using the Holocaust in my writing classes, friends and colleagues would often remark that they thought it was "very important" that students study this topic. One of the more common reasons was that "so that the Holocaust will never happen again." As the examples of Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia have shown, this hope has not come to pass. As one commentator points out, it would be more accurate to say that the phrase "Never Again" really means "Never again would Germans kill Jews in Europe in the 1940s." And then, alluding to the Crusades from the 13th century, this same writer adds that one might as well say, "Never again the slaughter of the Albigensians" (David Rieff, quoted in Novick 257).

Another reason that people approve of this topic is so that students can learn the "lessons of the Holocaust." While I certainly hope that students can learn something from the experience, I am repelled at the notion that the Holocaust has "lessons."[1] Too often people find a redemptive quality to the suffering of the victims, or they mine the story for evidence that some good always comes out of evil—the heroism of the victims or even the founding of the Israel. As Michael Berenbaum explains in the "Afterword" to the book that accompanies the exhibits of the Holocaust museum, "the central theme of the story of the Holocaust is not regeneration and

[1] In a similar way Shulamit Aloni, the first minister of education in Israel under Rabin's government, rebelled against having the state school system teach the "values of the Holocaust." As Amos Elon, reports in an article about Israel's use of the Holocaust for political purposes, Aloni found that the very term, "values of the Holocaust," "makes her shudder: the Holocaust had no values" (5).

rebirth, goodness or resistance, liberation or justice, but death and destruction, dehumanization and devastation, and, above all, loss" (220).

Peter Novick points out that these Holocaust lessons are, on the one hand, very general—steady human progress is a myth, as is the Enlightenment idea of human perfectibility, or science and technology are not benevolent or even neutral, but instead make possible terrible evil. It is not that these ideas are wrong—it's just that they are so general as to be useless—and you don't need to study the Holocaust to learn them. Other lessons, Novick continues, are so specific as to be controversial: to some, legalized abortion is "the American Holocaust." Some feminists have argued that it shows the natural consequences of "patriarchal values." Animal rights activists find parallels between the death camps and fur farms. The NRA uses the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto as an example of what can happen to a disarmed population. Gay activists have claimed that indifference in the general population to the AIDS epidemic is similar to the bystanders' behavior during the Holocaust (237-42). Some of these analogies can be quite powerful for some people, and Novick finally argues that it is impossible to claim that there are no lessons from the Holocaust. Ultimately, though, he argues that the extremity of the Holocaust makes it a dubious source for lessons. And one shouldn't be deriving simple-minded "lessons" from any historical event. "If there is . . . any wisdom to be acquired from contemplating an historical event," he write, "I would think it would derive from confronting it in all its complexity and its contradictions; the ways in which it resembles other events to which it might be compared as well as the ways it differs from them" (261).

That said, here are a few reasons I think for using the Holocaust in a writing course:

- The first is <u>accessibility</u>: The Holocaust is a story with a beginning, middle, and end. True, the beginning is considerably longer than most people realize, since one must start with the

long history of antisemitism, which dates back to the early years of Christianity. And in a sense, the story continues up to the present when we consider the effects of the Holocaust on the children of survivors.[2] But the main events took place from 1933 to 1945—just 12 years—and it ended completely with the defeat of the Nazis. During that time at least 5,100,000 Jews were killed, according to Raul Hilberg, one of the most conservative of the reputable historians. In 1943 alone, over half the victims perished. The self-contained quality of the Holocaust, combined with the fact that many of the survivors ended up in the U.S., is one of the factors that make it an event so well known in popular culture and so well documented in scholarly books and articles. Teaching materials on the subject abound; there are many organizations and foundations that encourage the study of the Holocaust.[3]

- A second reason is the emotional force of the topic, occasioned by the brutality and cruelty of the perpetrators, but also occasionally by the heroism of the victims. This emotional power encourages the students to conduct their inquiries with seriousness and care.
- At the same time, this emotion is usually not so personal as to inhibit writing.[4] Exploring controversial issues that seem to challenge a student's sense of identity can sometimes have this effect. A third reason is the emotional distance afforded by the topic. It is almost always the case on my campus that the writing teachers come from a far more liberal tradition than do most of the students, which creates a tension between instructor and students from the first day of class. We can certainly try to make the students somewhat more tolerant of other

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[2] *Maus* by Art Speigelman is a good choice for exploring this topic in more detail.

[3] The Educational Division of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum is one of the most important, but other organizations include the Holocaust Educational Foundation and Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. In addition, the Teaching Tolerance Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center has a more general goal that is closely related to the goals of teaching about the Holocaust.

[4] One might think that this argument would not apply only to Jewish students, especially if their family included victims of the Holocaust. But students who will be freshmen in fall 2000 may be born as late as 1982. Any Holocaust victims are more likely to be their grandparents or even great-grandparents than their parents. It is also true, however, that nontraditional college students are becoming more numerous.

cultures, races, and even sexual orientations, but ultimately, this process has to occur in circumstances that are beyond our control. The Holocaust gives students the opportunity to see historical examples of intolerance, racism, and religious bigotry and how complex these processes really were.

At the start of their study into this topic, students generally feel that they are dealing with clear-cut moral issues. To some extent this is true: the teacher and students can almost always begin their investigation agreeing on the large-scale issues. But as the class deepens its exploration into the topic, it becomes clear that many of the same morally ambivalent questions—the ones that encourage students to do their best writing when they approach them with enough rigor—are also lurking in the Holocaust. Students can be asked somewhat later in the course to confront their own prejudices. By that point, however, the instructor has had a chance to build a sense of trust among the students because the class has shared a common experience of making an initial exploration of a dramatic and even shocking subject.

Another circumstance that creates a useful emotional distance is that fact that the victims of the Holocaust were overwhelmingly Jews from Eastern Europe. They did not speak English or live in the suburbs. In general, they did not resemble the family of Anne Frank. Yet at the same time, we can identify with them to a greater extent than we do to, say, the Tutsi victims of the Rwandan genocide.

- Moral Complexity: The fourth of my reasons for using this topic is that the moral complexity of many of the issues, particularly the ones associated with the moral choices that ordinary people had to make, provide excellent material for eliciting powerful writing from the students. Theories of ethical and moral development describe how young adults tend to see

the world in less ambiguous terms than do older adults. The stakes students have in discussing these issues are raised by the extreme nature of these choices (often life versus death or choosing what might be best for one's family versus what might be best for one personally) and the fact that they are not hypothetical. For example, it is not difficult to sympathize with a victim like Anne Frank, but the role played by the Jewish Councils is much more difficult to sort out. On the one hand, they can be seen as collaborating to some extent with the Nazis, but such a view fails to account for the difficult and complex moral situation that they were placed in.

Novick's critique is valuable here as he points out that the very extremity of the situation that I have just promoted as a virtue does not really encourage people to speak out in the face of injustice. Most of us don't speak out for much smaller injustices when the stakes are much lower (247). Who are we to criticize a terrorized Pole for not aiding the Jews when the penalty for doing so was immediate execution of that person and his or her entire family? Rather than thinking that expecting a study of the Holocaust to lead directly to some sort of increased activism on the part of the oppressed, we might be better expect our students simply to think more clearly about making moral judgments from afar.

- A fifth reason for using the topic is historical complexity of the subject: Some issues raise questions about human nature to which there really are no definitive answers. What, for example, motivated the perpetrators? The debate between historians Daniel Jonah Goldhagen and Christopher Browning raises the question of whether the perpetrators were people with their own terrible history, people who are not much like most of us, or whether they were "ordinary"—that is pretty much like the general population from anywhere in the

world.[5] Students can be told the general outlines of this debate, but to grasp fully its implications, they must come to their own conclusions. It is invaluable to have the experience of writing one's way to a position on a difficult issue.

The Holocaust has a strong central narrative that is undisputed (except by the deniers): Hitler and his party came to power in 1933, ruthlessly eliminated their opposition, built progressively a campaign of persecution and intolerance toward the Jews, started World War II, and then systematically began murdering all the Jews of Europe, not even stopping when it became obvious that they would lose the war. Within that framework, though, there are many differing interpretations. When did the Nazi government decide on mass murder as the "final solution" to the "Jewish question"? Was it something that Hitler had planned all along (the "intentionalist" argument), or was it something that evolved as the war progressed (the "functionalist" argument)? How might we best characterize the resistance by the Jews? Was it virtually nonexistent, as Raul Hilberg describes? Was it widespread but subverted at every point by lack of opportunity and support from fellow resistance fighters and the Allies, as described by historians such as Nora Levin? Should we include within it the concept of "spiritual resistance"? What reasons might historians such as Hilberg and Levin have for their differing accounts? Should the U.S. have done more to aid the Holocaust victims during the war? In particular, should the Army Air Force have bombed Auschwitz in the summer and fall of 1944, as many survivors, Elie Wiesel among them, strongly argue? Or

[5] Was the primary motivation of the perpetrators the particularly virulent form of antisemitism that Daniel Jonah Goldhagen has described in *Hitler's Willing Executioners*? Or were there more causes, such as obedience to authority, conformity to the group, causes which were advanced earlier by Christopher Browning in his *Ordinary Men*?

should we believe the arguments of James H. Kitchens, who argues that it was impossible to do effectively?[6] All of these are legitimate questions in Holocaust Studies.

- A sixth reason for exploring this topic is to consider the role of language in a bureaucracy. Many of us like to think that we are "empowering" students to function in a world in which critical literacy is the primary means to asserting one's own identity and interests. In practice, the majority of our students will not completely assimilate these complex lessons. Instead, they will use their skill in scribal conventions to attain more modest positions in large bureaucracies—corporate, educational, or governmental. In only a few years, they will be the ones who draft memoranda, write instructions, enforce regulations—in short all the mundane tasks that make bureaucracies work. Studying the Holocaust in a writing course can provide these students with an insight into the enormous evil committed by one large bureaucracy. The murder of millions of people was not carried out only by gas chambers, rifles, bullets or even railroads. Authorized by a powerful government, it was organized by thousands of bureaucrats wielding pens, typewriters, stamps, and paper.[7] Writing leads to actions, which can have terrible consequences; more accurately put, writing *is* action. Through the corruption of language—the very term "Final Solution" being a euphemism for mass murder—the Nazi bureaucracy demonstrated how it is possible to conceal what one is doing, even from oneself. When students come to grasp the nature of the bureaucratic-

[6] For a detailed account of how this issue was handled in the permanent exhibit of the Holocaust museum, see Linenthal, pages 219-24.

[7] To complicate this issue, we must also be aware that the highest levels of the Nazi government did *not* depend on writing. As Michael R. Marrus writes, "As opposed to his British counterpart, Winston Churchill, who left mountains of documents, ruminating endlessly on possible courses of action, the Nazi dictator was reluctant to commit himself to paper with concrete ideas and preferred always to give orders orally, sometimes even then avoiding detailed instructions" (33). Holocaust deniers have been able to make much of this phenomenon. In his 1977 book *Hitler's War* written before he explicitly denied the existence of the Holocaust (see Lipstadt 162), David Irving used the fact that no written orders from Hitler to kill Jews have been found in order to argue that "the Führer was not responsible for anti-Jewish policy at all, was basically uninterested in Jews, and knew nothing about their terrible fate—at least until 1943" (Marrus 33-34).

administrative "destruction process," as described by Raul Hilberg, and the role that language played in this process, they will have learned a valuable lesson about how large organizations can function. It is of course no more accurate to claim that bureaucracies caused the Holocaust than it is to put the blame on railroads, but the potential use of such large organizations and technologies is always there. In addition to empowering our students, we should also teach them how their skills may be misused.

- Boundaries of Acceptable Discussion: Finally, the Holocaust allows us to investigate with our students the boundaries of acceptable discussion. This subject is unusual in that there are a number of historical questions that are generally considered to be *illegitimate*—the views of the Holocaust deniers. As Deborah Lipstadt has described, the methods of the deniers have gone beyond the days when their ideas were published in cheap pamphlets. The deniers' presence on the World Wide Web can appear professional and convincing.

Yet I am much less concerned now that Holocaust denial is a crisis requiring immediate attention. The anti-Semites and other deniers have been around for decades. In the early 1990's, they hit upon some new tactics such as the establishment of the Institute for Historical Review in an attempt at greater respectability or the call for "open debate" on the subject that was made in advertisements published in college newspapers. But these attempts at respectability have had little actual effect, in spite of some false alarms, such a 1993 Roper Poll that seemed to show that 22 percent of Americans doubted that the Holocaust had really occurred. When the question was asked in a less confusing way by rival polling organizations and by another Roper Poll, the 22 percent shrank down to 1 to 2 percent, which consistent with other industrialized countries (Novick 271-72).

The argument, if one can call it such a thing, for the existence of the Holocaust is similar to the arguments for the existence of other significant historical events and scientific theories: it is based on the convergence of overwhelming evidence. If one of these pieces of evidence is found to be incorrect—the manufacture of soap from the bodies of victims, for example—this does not mean that the whole edifice comes down like a deck of cards. Exploring this rhetorical issue with students can be valuable in seeing how evidence is used in making arguments. We are certain to find a few students who are gulled into believing the claims of deniers, but we should keep the dimensions of this problem in perspective. A far more serious problem for academe is the contempt in which so many students seem to hold evolution—but we seldom think that our writing courses should be constructed to deal with this issue.[8]

I cautiously suggest that the phenomenon of Holocaust denial is a worthwhile subject in a writing class. How does the rhetoric of the deniers' publications operate? What makes certain issues unacceptable to mainstream researchers? Are all these alleged deniers really nefarious antisemites who deserve to be put into the same category with thugs from white surpremist organizations? When a denier like Bradley Smith wants to place an advertisement in a college newspaper, does it really raise "First Amendment Issues"? What is wrong, for example, with the deniers' argument that the Holocaust story has "another side"? The recent trial in England, in which David Irving unsuccessfully sued Deborah Lipstadt for libel raises many of these questions.

[8] A good source for orienting oneself to these issues is Michael Shermer's *Why People Believe Weird Things*. Shermer writes chapters on both creationists and Holocaust deniers.

Can we foster tolerance and empathy through a study of the Holocaust? To the extent that this is possible at all in a writing course, I would say that the answer is yes. But we should not expect to change students' thinking in direct ways. This is the danger of trying to Americanize the Holocaust—package these complex issues into series of lessons that promote good citizenship and the value of diversity. Does this mean that we might as well give up on the effort? No. The seven reasons I've offered here—accessibility, emotional force, emotional distance, moral and historical complexity, the role that language and writing can play in a bureaucracy, and finally the issue of what constitutes acceptable discussion—all provide compelling reasons for why the study of the Holocaust is well suited for what we do in our writing courses.

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